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## Humboldt Kosmos



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### The Power of Images

## Learning from Cusanus

By Inigo Bocken

**They are bent on broadcasting time but still criticise the flood of images that media democracy produces. In the year 2005, modern politicians are sitting in the image trap. The ideas of a fifteenth-century philosopher could help them out.**

Pictures rule our world. Politicians, artists and even scientists who do not appear on TV don't really exist. If they really do make it onto the screen, they ought to be able to give a thirty-second account of a very complicated state of affairs. Otherwise they will quickly fade into anonymity again. Anything that doesn't appear as an image has hardly any clout in culture and society.

Advertising agencies have long been aware of the power of pictures. Nowadays, instead of venerable and well-founded theories on a good and fulfilling life, images increasingly determine our most important decisions about our lives. Superficial hedonism, radiant looks or well-developed muscles have long ceased to count. Advertising is playing around more and more with double levels of meaning, setting its sights on the reflexive power of pictures that are not merely striking but develop their true impact in the brain of the beholder.

Nevertheless, many political scholars and philosophers remain suspicious of pictures. Ever since the days of Plato, it has traditionally been claimed that images cannot be a substitute for the precision and depth of language. Here, one tends to forget that language also uses pictures and that the latter often mark the climax of language creativity - whether it be in art or, above all, in politics. To a politician, looking good in a TV broadcast means more than having one's tie knotted properly. He has to sum up the unfathomable chaos of reality in a language picture. The same applies to complicated scientific insights. Einstein's famous remark that God doesn't play dice is only one of several examples. Strong images bear political power. Enthusiasm about German unity would not have had the same impact had it not been for the "blossoming landscapes" people pictured in their brains. By the same token, disappointment later on about the economic fruits of unity failing to materialise would hardly have been so great without this image and the promises it offered.

Instead of the usual criticism of images and their ostensible superficiality and lack of precision, methods are required to handle pictures more effectively, to analyse, criticise and refine them. Politics has to ask itself whether pictures do not bear "reason" of their own and whether criticism of pictures does not restrict human thought. Without pictures and images, the opportunities for a constructive critique of political conditions are reduced.

### The middle ages as an inspiration

Politicians in the age of electronic media could try to become inspired by, of all people, a man of the late middle ages: Nicolaus Cusanus. As one of the 15th century's leading politicians, this German philosopher, who lived from 1401 - 1464, had recognised the importance of pictures in human reality. While medieval society displayed sensitivity towards pictorial symbols, pictures were always regarded as a second-class aid for the uneducated. The true contents of religious and social truths were reserved for highly educated theorists speaking Latin. But to Cusanus, pictures did not represent a mere



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form of decay of rational thought or a pure deterrent conceived to protect simple people from making fatal mistakes and tumbling into hell as a result.

“Pictures represented a pure deterrent conceived to protect simple people from making fatal mistakes and tumbling into hell as a result.”

Unlike his antique and medieval predecessors, he did not seek to expose the picture in favour of a conceptual or theoretical truth. The latest developments in Flemish painting in his age were the key to a new understanding of the personal perspective. Thus Cusanus sent the monks of a Lake Tegern monastery who had asked him for a comprehensible interpretation of his thoughts the copy of a self-portrait by the great painter Rogier van der Weyden together with a request that they hang the picture up and walk to and fro in a semicircle in front of it. One of the novelties of Flemish painting was to depict people in a manner suggesting that they were really looking at the beholder and thus creating the impression that they were taking him into their world. In art history, painters such as Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden or Hugo van der Goes were often accused of not having the skills to represent perspectives as perfectly as the painters of the Italian renaissance had. However, the use of several perspectives was by no means an expression of a lack of technical skills but a method to integrate the beholder. Cusanus recognised this and attempted to transfer this artistic innovation to the social and political situation. For late medieval society was also increasingly being shaped by a plurality of views that could no longer be reconciled theoretically.

Anyone looking at Rogier's portrait will believe that Rogier is looking at him alone. The more he attempts to test this impression, the more he will be convinced by its impact. However, when he meets another beholder on the way around the semicircle in front of the picture reporting a similar experience to him, he will understand that he can only observe what is happening in the picture from his own perspective.

### All perspectives are true

Such an account ought to plunge the beholder into deep despair. For he has discovered that his belief is merely one of an endless number of views and that he is not in the midst of events but rather on the edge of an infinite number of perspectives. Nevertheless, this is not the conclusion Cusanus arrives at. Rather, he reasons that both perspectives are true. What the beholder sees is really only his own perspective, and yet it is his sole possible access route. The observer knows that he would only be able to understand the painting if he were to get to know all possible perspectives, and he simultaneously grasps that this is impossible. Thus he can handle other perspectives without rejecting them as untrue.

In a paper of the same year 1453, "On the Peace of Faith", Cusanus applies this dynamic of perspectives to the political and religious situation of his times. This paper was prompted by the bloody strife between Moslems and Christians in Constantinople. It refers to a fictitious peace conference attended by the representatives of all peoples and religions known at the time. They attempt to discover "the one religion in the diversity of customs and rites", without any one of these religions having to forfeit its own notion of truth. With a degree of tolerance that is remarkable for his days, Cusanus outlines how the different notions are perspectives of the truth that can engage in debate in a dynamic process. Unlike the enlighteners after him, Cusanus does not demand peoples to give up their pictorial notions in favour of an abstract truth of reason. But although he set out from the assumption that nobody would be able to assume a position outside the perspectives, he regarded doing as if people could ever live without this absolute claim to truth as a dangerous illusion. It was essential to take this claim seriously and recognise it rather than dismissing it as fundamentalist. Because they accept the diversity of absolute claims, the representatives of the different peoples and cultures do not have to forfeit their identity.

Cusanus' interpretation of the picture is the key to handling political images - even today. Political conflicts are not determined by theoretical or rational arguments but by different visions and perspectives. This insight is still valid

as Rule Number One regarding the debate about images in politics nearly 600 years after Cusanus. The second insight is that pictures can inspire politics and impart ideas that those merely campaigning with words and party manifestos might never get. Perhaps visits to art galleries instead of TV studios are going to be the next major trend among the media pros in politics.

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